

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BONN 08384

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, GW, UR
SUBJECT: BREZHNEV VISIT: INITIAL IMPRESSIONS OF
BREZHNEV'S PERFORMANCE HERE

1. EMBASSY OFFICERS WHO VIEWED INITIAL TV COVERAGE OF BREZHNEV'S VISIT HAD DIFFERING OPINIONS AS TO THE SOVIET LEADER'S APPEARANCE. MOST OFFICERS, INCLUDING AMBASSADOR STOESSEL, THOUGHT BREZHNEV APPEARED TO BE IN RELATIVELY GOOD SHAPE, WHILE OTHERS THOUGHT HE WAS SOMEWHAT FEEBLE. ALL WERE AGREED THAT BREZHNEV'S MOVEMENTS WERE STIFF, CAREFUL AND DELIBERATE.

2. THE LATTER WAS PARTICULARLY NOTABLE DURING BREZHNEV'S DESCENT FROM THE PLANE UPON ARRIVAL AT BONN-COLOGNE AIRPORT. THE SOVIET LEADER CAREFULLY GRABBED THE GUARDRAIL AS HE PROCEEDED TO DESCEND. AFTER BEING GREETED BY SCHEEL, SCHMIDT AND OTHER MEMBERS OF THE RECEIVING PARTY, BREZHNEV WALKED OVER TO A GROUP OF SOVIET EMBASSY DEPENDENTS, AT WHICH POINT HE BECAME QUITE ANIMATED. BREZHNEV THEN, ACCOMPANIED BY SCHEEL, REVIEWED THE GERMAN HONOR GUARD.
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PAGE 02 BONN 08384 051701Z

HIS MOVEMENTS APPEARED SOMEWHAT STIFF THOUGH SOME OBSERVERS THOUGHT THIS NOT SURPRISING FOR A MAN HIS AGE. ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS, SCHEEL HAD TO DIRECT HIM WITH HAND GESTURES, WHICH MAY HAVE BEEN A RESULT OF SOME DISORIENTATION ON BREZHNEV'S PART OR HIS NOT HAVING BEEN ADEQUATELY BRIEFED ON THE PROTOCOL CEREMONIES.

3. THE MOST VISIBLE EVIDENCE OF BREZHNEV'S QUESTIONABLE HEALTH CAME AT THE CONCLUSION OF A PHOTO-TAKING CEREMONY AT THE CHANCELLERY. BREZHNEV, WHO WAS SEATED AT A LOW COUCH ALONG WITH GROMYKO, HAD OBVIOUS DIFFICULTY IN STANDING UP. THE SOVIET LEADER HAD TO USE BOTH HANDS TO PUSH HIMSELF UP AND AS HE BEGAN TO STAND, HIS LEFT LEG (APPARENTLY HIS KNEE) BUCKLED, AT WHICH POINT GROMYKO HAD TO PROP HIM UP BY HOLDING HIS ELBOW. SEVERAL PARTICIPANTS AT PRESIDENT SCHEEL'S DINNER FOR BREZHNEV ON MAY 4 TOLD US HE HAD SIMILAR DIFFICULTIES RISING FROM HIS CHAIR AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE MEAL. HE ALSO SHOWED SOME UN-STEADINESS WHILE DESCENDING STAIRS UPON DEPARTURE FROM SCHEEL'S OFFICE.

4. A GERMAN SOURCE WHO ATTENDED LAST NIGHT'S DINNER AND SPOKE BRIEFLY WITH BREZHNEV AND SCHEEL IN THE RECEIVING LINE DESCRIBED THE SOVIET LEADER AS APPEARING PASTY AND VERY FRAGILE. A CHANCELLERY SOURCE WHO RECENTLY SERVED IN MOSCOW TOLD US HE THOUGHT BREZHNEV LOOKED "VERY BAD."

5. WE UNDERSTAND FROM SEVERAL SOURCES THAT DURING HIS MEETING ON MAY 4 WITH SCHMIDT, BREZHNEV READ FROM NOTES FOR A STRETCH OF 60 MINUTES. IN THIS CONTEXT, CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 BONN 08384 051701Z

FOREIGN OFFICE OFFICIALS HAVE TOLD US THAT IN RECENT MEETINGS WITH GERMANS IN MOSCOW, BREZHNEV HAS CONSISTENTLY SPOKEN ONLY FROM NOTES.

6. WE HASTEN TO ADD THAT THE ABOVE ARE INITIAL IMPRESSIONS OF EMBASSY OFFICERS, SOME OF WHOM HAVE RARELY SEEN THE SOVIET LEADER ON TELEVISION. WE WILL REPORT IN MORE DETAIL ON GERMAN IMPRESSIONS OF BREZHNEV'S HEALTH, AS WELL AS ON HIS SUBSTANTIVE PERFORMANCE, AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE VISIT. STOESEL

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